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SUBJECT: BURKINA FASO/COTE D'IVOIRE: FOREIGN MINISTER
KOUCHNER'S VISIT

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's January 27 visit to Burkina Faso focused on Cote d'Ivoire and the need to remain engaged on ensuring free and fair elections there, according to the MFA desk officer responsible for both countries. The main priority is to enable the elections process to go forward so that SRSG Choi Young-Jin can certify them as acceptable, whenever they take place. Kouchner's statement to the effect that the elections could be delayed for "a month or two" was not intended as a suggestion that the elections be postponed but rather a statement of fact in view of the still complex work on identification and registration that must take place before elections can be held. France's Operation Licorne will draw down to the 1,800 level, which France intends to maintain until the end of the Licorne/UNOCI mandate, assuming no drastic change in circumstances in Cote d'Ivoire. END SUMMARY.

Burkina Faso

¶2. (C) Karim Ben Cheikh, MFA desk officer for Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire, discussed FM Kouchner's trip to the former on January 27, following stops in the DRC and Rwanda (septel). He said that Kouchner's two previously planned trips to Burkina Faso had been postponed and that the GOF wanted to meet with Compaore to express the GOF's desire to maintain close and stronger ties with Burkina Faso. Specifically, Kouchner wanted to express appreciation for Compaore's leadership on Togo and especially Cote d'Ivoire. He also wanted to congratulate Compaore for having been elected chair of ECOWAS and for Burkina Faso's having obtained a seat on the UN Security Council. Ben Cheikh said that Kouchner was well received by Compaore and that the visit went smoothly.

Cote d'Ivoire

¶3. (C) Ben Cheikh said that most of Kouchner's discussion with Compaore focused on Cote d'Ivoire. Ben Cheikh then provided an update from the GOF perspective. He said that the GOF remained firmly committed to the Ouagadougou Accords and the peace process that they had put in motion. There was, however, cause for concern. Little work had been done on the two key tasks that must be accomplished before elections could be held -- identification and voter registration. Lack of progress in these areas was what led Kouchner to state that postponing the elections for "one or two months" would be acceptable. Ben Cheikh said firmly that in making that assessment, Kouchner was not trying to suggest that the elections "should" be postponed but that if technical problems could not be resolved in time, the June date could slip with no harm done. Ben Cheikh noted that

critics had seized on Kouchner's comments, speculating that he was sending a message or somehow trying to manipulate the process, but that was not the case.

¶4. (C) Ben Cheikh continued that it was not possible to determine whether Gbagbo or any of the other political actors had a hidden agenda or that they wanted to sabotage the elections process. This remained a possibility. However, Ben Cheikh suggested that Gbagbo and other leaders understood that Cote d'Ivoire risked a severe rebuke from the international community if the elections did not take place within a reasonable period after the June target date, if that date could not be met. Ben Cheikh doubted that Gbagbo would take that risk, especially since it was quite possible he could win a free and fair election. Ben Cheikh speculated that Gbagbo might have learned from the Togo experience, where the Faure regime's standing had risen significantly after the successful October 2007 legislative elections.

¶5. (C) Ben Cheikh said that France's top priority, which he hoped Ivoirians shared, was for elections to take place in June 2008 or not long thereafter, and that these elections be sufficiently fair and transparent that UN SRSG Choi could certify them. That remained the ultimate goal -- elections worthy of Choi's certification and stamp of approval. Ben Cheikh noted that the French were quite satisfied with the job Choi had been doing. He was serious, engaged, and able to prod sufficiently but inoffensively in a manner that made him effective. Ben Cheikh had the impression that Ivoirian parties on all sides respected Choi. For his part, Choi seemed bent on having the electoral process develop successfully and yield the certifiable elections everyone wanted.

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¶6. (C) Ben Cheikh confirmed that France would begin drawing down Operation Licorne, to about the 1,800 level. He noted that the reductions would not be among combat or mobile troops. Most of the reductions would consist of support and logistics staff that were no longer necessary since other parts of Licorne had already departed before the current round of drawdowns. Ben Cheikh said that, under present conditions, Operation Licorne would remain at the 1,800 level for the remainder of its mandate, assuming there were no drastic changes in the overall situation. He said that Licorne would be able to support UNOCI as mandated at this level for the duration of the two missions.

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